

Douglas C. Comer

Continuing Education My Fulbright in Thailand

Days in Bangkok began before sunrise. I would rise to work with my laptop computer on a deck overlooking the street next to our apartment. Dimly lit in a bluish hue, I must have looked eerie to passers-by. At dawn monks would begin to make their daily rounds, dressed in the saffron robes that were their only possession except for the metal bowls they carried. Housewives, moved by a characteristic Thai generosity and the desire to make the merit necessary for a better life in their next incarnation, would come out of their homes to dish plain rice into the bowls, providing each monk a day's sustenance.

I envied the monks the simplicity of their lives as I worked furiously to meet deadlines. The host institution for my Fulbright Senior Scholarship in cultural resource management was the Thai Office of the National Culture Commission, but my workplace was at SEAMEO-SPAFA (the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Center for Archaeology and the Fine Arts). My assignment was to write cultural resource management guidelines for the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO). SPAFA would then promulgate the guidelines to the nine member countries of SEAMEO (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam).

An office in the new SPAFA building was a great asset in this endeavor. The five-story facility

housed one of the finest archeology, art, and architecture libraries in Southeast Asia, put together under the leadership of Khunying Manmas Chavalit, former Director of the Thai National Library. The Director of SPAFA, Dr. Ruang Charoenchai (now deceased) made the resources of not only the library, but also the graphics and publishing department readily available to me. The SPAFA Senior Archaeologist, Ajarn Pisit Charoenwongsa, one of the foremost Southeast Asian archeologists and a pioneer in the region for cultural resource management, introduced me to other leading researchers in Southeast Asia and led me to the material I would need in order to prepare the guidelines. The guidelines had been his idea. His staff provided tours of archeological sites that filled almost every weekend and holiday for my family and myself. Also, he arranged for me to present lectures and conduct review meetings at venues in Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Cambodia.

Enveloped by a world where the ideal was a "cool heart," I began to perceive my determination to achieve my objectives as being perhaps too heated. On Saturday mornings we would pass Lumpini Park on our way out of town to whatever archeological site we were visiting that weekend. Groups of people would be in the park, practicing *tai chi*, a regimen of rhythmic movements thought to harmonize body and soul with lines of force in the world. Next weekend I really should try that, I would think.

I have been back several times since my departure in April of 1994, but so far, regrettably, I have not joined those in Lumpini Park. By the time we bid a reluctant farewell to Bangkok, SPAFA had printed a draft version of the guidelines, which were distributed for review to the nine member nations. One year later, in May of 1995, SPAFA held a conference at the National University of Singapore at which review comments were presented. Informed by the comments of representatives from the nine countries, and the enlightening discussions that followed, I made revisions to the guidelines, which were then approved as *The SPAFA Integrated Cultural Resource Management Guidelines for Southeast Asia, Vol. 1, Material Culture*. The printing was in English, which is the *lingua franca* in all countries in Southeast Asia, with the exception of those in what was once French Indo-China. The guidelines have also, therefore, been translated into Vietnamese.

Participants in a cultural site management course taught at SPAFA by the author:





A monumental Buddha image made in the 14th or 15th century at Souvanna-koumkham in Borkeo province, Laos. Note holes in torso produced by looters searching for artifacts that are often associated with such monuments. Photo by Bounheung Bouasiseng-paseuth.

In the summer of 1997 my wife and I returned to SPAFA to teach a course on the management of cultural sites. Students were from not only the SPAFA countries, but also Myanmar and Taiwan. In 1998 I presented a symposium about cultural resource management, which featured the guidelines, at the Indo Pacific Prehistory Association (IPPA) conference in Melaka, Malaysia. With Dr. Richard Englehardt, Director of the UNESCO Principal

Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (PROAP), I am co-editing a volume about CRM in Southeast Asia to be jointly published by UNESCO and the IPPA. I have become a Research Fellow at SPAFA. At the request of the Cambodian Ministry of Culture and Fine Arts and the Royal University of Phnom Penh, and in collaboration with Dr. Miriam Stark and Dr. Bion Griffin of the University of Hawaii, I have launched production of a geographical information system (GIS) database for the lower Mekong delta in Cambodia. The GIS will be the basis for a management plan we will write for the area. The area, about 60 miles south of Phnom Penh, is to be sustainably developed as a destination for tourists, encouraging them to spend more time in the capital and nearby. It includes Angkor Borei, an archeological site that might hold the key to understanding the development of the Khmer civilization that flourished at Angkor Wat and other sites in northeast Thailand, and persists in the modern nation of Cambodia. Over the next two years I will participate in two training courses to be held in Bangkok by the UNESCO Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (PROAP), and the establishment by PROAP of GIS/cultural resource management centers in Nanjing, China and Sri Lanka. During that same period, in conjunction with US/ICOMOS, I will be conducting several projects in Southeast Asia that demon-

strate the use of aerial and satellite remote sensing and geographical information systems in finding and managing archeological and other heritage sites. These sites include not only Angkor Borei, but also the Plain of Jars in Laos and Vigan, a colonial era town, in the Philippines. This program is being conducted with support from the Environmental Systems Research Institute, Inc. (ESRI). My tenure with the Fulbright program has also led to research and involvement with cultural resource management efforts in the mid-East and Africa.

When we first returned from Thailand, I would awake very early each morning, still impelled by the sense that I had only a short time in which to absorb a great deal of material and then to produce something useful from that material. I still feel that urgency. Sites in Southeast Asia are being damaged or destroyed at a truly alarming rate. Destruction brought about by development may have slackened with the economic downturn in the region, but these economic woes provide even greater incentive to loot. David Byrne has estimated that 80 percent of the sites in Thailand have been looted, a figure probably equaled in other Southeast Asian countries. Illicit trafficking in Cambodian artifacts, for example, is rampant. Sites in Southeast Asia should be very important to all of us. They are often exquisite, and reveal an aesthetic system that is intriguing because it is different from the Western one to which most of us are accustomed. Scientifically, the sites inform us about the ancient links between East and West, links of trade and the diffusion of religious and political ideas. The antiquity of these links, and the ways in which they operated, have yet to be finally determined. The need for action draws me back to Bangkok. An equal attraction, however, is a fascination with a culture that takes a long view, and which teaches the patience that will be necessary to solve the problem of site destruction in Southeast Asia in a way acceptable to all involved.

After 23 years with the National Park Service, for most of that time as Chief of the Applied Archeology Center, Douglas C. Comer (comer@wam.umd.edu) is now principal of Cultural Sites Research and Management (CSRM), a non-profit organization. Over the next two years he will lead the US/ICOMOS Cultural Sites Analysis Initiative. In this capacity he will write standards and protocols for the use of aerial and satellite remote sensing in the finding and management of archeological and other heritage sites.